

## 10. THE LETTER

*Dear Helena,*

*For year I thought that you hated me for not showing up. I had a job interview that evening. It was a dinner engagement. At the time, I was convinced that the job meant everything for my future. I wanted to skip the appointment. I wanted to go and meet you. I was paralyzed.*

*My compromise was to send Bertie. She was supposed to give you my phone number. I waited all night for your call. Waited for days. By the time that I made it over to the school, you had left for America. I asked them to forward my letter. They said that they couldn't. So I had to close the book on my feelings.*

*I think that it was the worse thing that I have ever done in my life. I went along with my plans, their plans for me. But I have been miserable down deep. I cannot be this way.*

*Those days in Corfu were the only thing in my life that could really be called living. Everything else was this dull grey. Vanessa is a wonderful person. And a great mother. But I have grown apart from her. I feel that I am only with her for my duty. That my true love is somewhere else in the world. It is a frightening thing to admit to yourself that everything in your life is fake. But that's how it is.*

*I am sorry for everything. I am sorry that Bertie betrayed me. She didn't want you to be with me. She thought only for Vanessa. So she sabotaged the meeting. She never delivered the phone number to you. She made something up about you writing me a letter. I think that the purpose was to throw you off the trail. Once you felt dejected, you wouldn't try to find me.*

*I was sure that there had been no communication on your end. Recently Mother had to go in the hospital for a minor problem. I needed some papers for Andrew's christening. And I found your letter. What a joy. Mother had hidden your letter for year. I wonder why she had not destroyed it. I think it was the spoils of war. I curse the warrior in her. It has only poisoned my life.*

*I read and reread your letter. Suddenly everything made sense. I couldn't help it. I started to weep. I wept for what I had done to you. How I had destroyed our love. My hesitation had allowed them to interfere with my life. When I had the chance, I needed to run to you. Nothing should have stood in my way.*

*I wept for myself. That I have made an absolute shambles of my life. Once I found the letter, it was my resolution to find you. And it has taken a while. But I have finally found you. I hope that my letter might find you in good spirits. I hope in your heart that you can forgive the most grievous error on my part.*

*I will understand if you do not want to see me again. I have no doubt become the scoundrel of your past. You can punish me for my fault by rejecting me for all eternity.*

*Just remember as my heart beats, there is still a love for you in my soul.*

*Your lover,  
Tony*

The letter found Helena to be a successful graphics designer in New York City. She had

her own luxury apartment. She was always busy. She enjoyed her work. Her training in London had given her a style that was imitated but never duplicated. Her originality was her revenge against the errors of her youth. She had closed the gate on Bessborough Gardens years ago. She didn't want to be that helpless girl again. She could hardly recognize the portrait of the self from this previous era.

Tony's letter attempted to take her back to this place. But the emotions were not the same. She had never met her great love. She hadn't even settled for second best. But she found mature men with whom she could share her company. Tony had been a spoiled little boy who had manipulated every situation that came his way. He now used his sister and his mother as the poor excuse for his own shortcomings. This seemed to be the standard behavior on his part.

It was not as if her heart was encumbered by a commitment to another man. But her sanity depended on her ignoring his evident proposal. What kind of man was he to turn his back on his wife and child? Even if Vanessa could not measure up to Helena's accomplishments, that did not disqualify her as a wife and a lover. These appeals could work on a teenager who was a glutton for romance novels, but a mature woman would know what to do with the letter.

The letter actually floated on top of a pile of trash in Helena's waste basket. If only she could have dealt with her emotions so clearly when she was younger. As her appointment walked through the door, a breeze filled the office and the letter glided to the floor. Helena was too distracted to pick it up. She became absorbed by the plans discussed at the meeting. It was only much later in the afternoon that she again discovered the letter in the middle of the floor. She picked it up with the intention of placing it back in the trash can.

Tony's words still echoed for her as she looked at the letter again. She thought about the vain Bertie as she went about her mission to mess with Helena's life. She should never have been so civil with the impudent monster. What was she saving her wrath for?

The lights started to come on as dusk set in. The city skyline reminded her that she was lifetime away from London. No self-centered appeal could get her to abandon what made her new life. Other kisses had taken the place of those romantic treats from her past. She could let herself fall victim to her imagination.

She had a great deal of work to finish before she left the office. She was going to eat alone tonight. But she found no detriment in it. The next day she would wake up with hope and head to work. She like her life.

The letter was still sitting on her desk when she came in to work. She had meant to discard it again. Her mind had just drifted off while she was looking at it. A new day and an empty trash bin offered every opportunity to rid herself of Tony once and for all.

If she didn't destroy the letter, it would mean that she still held out some hope for their reunion. What did he have to offer her? He was the one who now seemed pathetic. He had given himself to a lie. He would have to live with its consequences. No one had saved her from her haunting. There was no angel that would come along to rescue him.

It had only been a few years, but it seemed like centuries. Once the ghosts of the past have been buried, their account also need to be closed. Helena was committed to this rule. She did not want to even taste of the fruits of her former infatuation. She had closed that book long ago. At that time, she lived her life as these unconnected incidents. Only her studies had kept her whole. Now she really knew what living was about. It had nothing to do with the doom and

gloom of her adolescence. If this feeling had hung on too long, it only convinced her how important it was to resist Tony's entreaty.

The dead needed to stay dead.

Even as the day wore on, Helena left the letter sitting on the far corner of her desk.

"What's that?" one of her clients asked.

"Only some unfinished business."

What did she have to do to finish her business? Simply allow the letter to slide down into waste basket. What was holding her back?

Helena had often employed Stephanie in her design projects. They met after work for dinner. There was none of the giddiness of her days with Rachel.

"You're not going to try to contact him?"

"Of course not. I don't know why we're even talking about it."

"There is one possibility. You use this as an opportunity. Get the revenge that you deserve. You could destroy his life. Get him to make love to you and then embarrass him before his sweet wife."

"That would only gratify his wish that there's still something between us. There's no dram because there is nothing. No regrets. I don't even think about it."

"I'm sure that you're a little curious."

"Of course I am. Just like your curious. It the same with a movie that you have to turn off to go somewhere. You wonder what's going to happen, but it's just a movie. You turn off the TV and go about your business."

"Have you been going about your business?"

"Of course, I have."

The next night she appeared to have even more resolve when she had dinner with Tim.

"You're not thinking about going back?"

"There was never anything to go back to. I made up something in my mind that never really existed."

"Is that the same with me Helena?"

He put his hand on hers.

"We have fun together. Who knows what might happen if we give it time."

She now saw love as this slow burn. If it happened, it would be great. But she would not die for its effects.

Tim kissed her passionately when he took her back to her apartment.

"I'd love to, dear, but I've got an early meeting. We'll have to see each other on the weekend."

He kissed her again on his way out. She got lost in his embrace for an extra second, and then she let him get away.

"Later."

Was she pulling back from him? Tim was a lovely guy. She was getting to know him well. But she wondered if the chemistry was right.

The next day the letter was still on the corner of the desk. In a fit, Helena crumpled it up and threw it in the trash.

"I hope that wasn't for me." Stephanie gave her a strange look. Helena turned away as

she tried to explain herself.

“I sent Tim home early. I wonder if he thinks something is going on.”

“Something is going on.”

“Not exactly. It’s just that damn letter has been no help.”

“You have to forget about the letter.”

“I’m trying.”

“The letter, the letter. Just pretend that the damn thing never arrived. No letter, no bad feelings.”

“But think about the letter. This is every girl’s romantic dream.”

“Romantic nothing. The man is married.”

“But he hates his life.”

“He just says that so that he can get you into bed.”

“I don’t even live in London.”

“You can meet him in some swank hotel where he can tell you how much he hates his wife.

“He does hate his wife.”

“He has a kid with her. What are you going to do? Become his mistress. Get involved in that mess. He’ll never leave his wife for you. He’s got the best of both worlds.”

“What world. I’m still here in New York. He’s in London. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Keep it that way. If you don’t want to go insane, let him go.”

She left the letter in the dustbin. She wasn’t going to fetch it out this time. When they picked up the trash that evening, Tony’s legacy was gone for good.

She met with Tim that weekend. They were going to go boating but she opted out. They shared a quiet dinner on Saturday.

“Are you going to invite me up?”

“I want to. I just don’t know what’s wrong. I think my insomnia is kicking in.”

“You haven’t felt like that in years.”

“I do now. I just have to sleep on my own until it passes.”

Tim tried to be understanding. But he didn’t like how things were going. He felt that their passion was quickly cooling off.

“I just need a few days, and I’ll be back to normal.”

He accepted her explanation. Once she was alone, she was able to quiet down. And her sleep was restful. She spent an event less Sunday. She read the paper, had a late breakfast, and went for a long walk in the park. The spring air invigorated her. That night she slept well. The curse seemed to have passed as quickly as it set in.

Stephanie stopped by early on Monday.

“Do you have those designs that I was working on?”

“I gave them to the client. I still have the copies for you. There somewhere on the desk.”

Helena rummaged through her things. The desk was in order, and she found the copies in quick order. But something fell from her desk. Stephanie picked it up.”

“What’s that Stephanie?” Helena looked at what was Stephanie’s hand.

“It’s an envelope.”

“Is it yours?”

“It was on your desk. It’s the envelope from Tony’s letter. It has his address on it. I’ll just toss it in the trash.”

“Yeah, do that.”

Stephanie aimed for the trash and missed. They both laughed.

Helena reached over to pick it up, and she almost bumped into Stephanie.

“Stephanie, what the hell is going on?”

They both looked at each other. Helena finally picked up the envelope, and she held it in her hand for a few seconds before she dropped it in the garbage. Stephanie picked it out of the trash.

“I just want to make sure that you want to do this.”

“Of course, I do.”

And she did away with it just like that.

After Stephanie left, Helena took the envelope out of the trash. Had she really wanted it to end this suddenly?

She held the envelope up trying to find out some clue. She looked at the address to see if it might tell her something. He had told her about the house in St. John’s Wood. She assumed that he had taken it over.

She was already wrapping her imagination around his story. She needed to stop this. She tossed the envelope in the trash and went back to working.

At lunch she and Stephanie again laughed about the envelope.

“It’s still in the trash.”

“Where it’s going to stay.”

“That’s good.”

“I did take it out to look at. I even remember the address.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. But I might have got it wrong.”

She might have forgotten to postal code, but she still remembered the address. She would remember it as long as anything in her life. She wanted to forget.

“Just promise me that you won’t write him.”

“I promise.”

Tim tried to see her that week.

“You’re pushing me away.”

“I’m not doing that. I’m really busy. I’ve got some work due at the end of the week. Stephanie’s going to be away so I need to get with her as much as possible before she goes.”

“I just hope that Tony’s not making his way into the back of your mind.”

“You have nothing to worry about.”

But Helena needed to tell Tim something. It wasn’t going to work out. But she was afraid to admit that to herself. It would really seem as if the letter had been the catalyst for her new way of thinking.

Stephanie cornered her before she left for home.

“Let’s go out for drinks. You need it.”

They found a bar near work that wasn’t too crowded.

“Where did you find this place.”

“I come here all the time.”

“Stephanie, I didn’t know that you were a secret lush.”

“I can conduct my affairs secretly.”

“I want to do some serious drinking. Get me a gin and tonic.”

They both settled in one of the secluded booths.

“Are you going to break up with Tim?”

“I really don’t have a choice.”

“The ghost isn’t taking over again.”

“Tim’s a great guy. But he’s not driven the way that I am.”

“You mean that he’s more human than you are.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Helena, just promise me one thing. Don’t go back to London.”

“I can’t go to London. I’m swamped with work.”

“Don’t ask him here either.”

Helena’s break up lacked for real drama. Tim thought it might be in the making. But he also surmised that the letter had shaken her up more than she was admitting.

“That’s just his way of getting back at you. If it wasn’t happening with him, it had nothing to do with the letter.” Stephanie was trying to build up her confidence.

But Helena felt the letter made her think about Tim in a new way. The break up didn’t make her feel alone. She had work to do. She was satisfied with her life.

The worse thing that she could do was reply to the letter. She needed Stephanie to help her keep up a united front. She promised herself that she was not going to contact Tony at all.

“If you just accept a physical relationship, you’re admitting to some flaw in you. It’s like he can’t get over that problem in you. So he never had to give himself to you completely. He can just run back and forth to his wife. From that day on, he’ll play you like a yo-yo.”

She needed to take Stephanie’s warning.

“You marry someone for life.” Helena added to Stephanie’s argument. “But your love may only last for a short time.”

“You’re trying to understand him. He’s a cad.”

“You have it right.”

“I know how hard it is to admit that you’re being used. You want to believe him. Just remember, he can say anything that he wants. He always has a wife to go back to.”

“What’s worse is that he can do anything that he wants. This makes him totally free.”

“What do you mean?”

“He loses all inhibition. He’s just like an animal.”

“You better watch that!”

“Don’t you think that I know it.”

“Let me get some more drinks.”

She came back with a guy from the bar.

“Hi, I’m Clayton from Houston.”

Stephanie gave Helena that look. They both realized that they had to get rid of him as soon as possible. As he moved into the booth his body brushed by Helena. She tingled.

Helena whispered to Stephanie, “Why did you bring him over here?”

Stephanie was a bit aggressive with their *catch*, “If you’re from Houston, where did you learn about this place?”

“I’ve got a brother who lives here. So what are you ladies drinking?”

“What are you buying?” asked Stephanie.

“I see the game. I’ll get you whatever you want.”

Helena tried to be polite, “I appreciate the hospitality. But I don’t want to make a visitor seem unwelcome.”

“Go ahead, I’ll buy whatever you want.”

“I’ll have a double Martel. What do you want Helena?”

“I’ll have a cranberry and vodka.”

He touched her arm to gesture the bartender. She welcomed his touch.

“Clayton, what do you do?”

“I’m a chemical engineer. My firm helps clean up toxic waste.”

“Fascinating.”

Stephanie smiled as Helena tried to make him seem at home. The conversation heated up the night progressed.

Stephanie questioned Helena when he went to the bathroom, “I thought that you wanted to get rid of him.”

“I did. But now I find him sort of cute.”

“Helena, you know where this is leading.”

“I just need a distraction.”

“Don’t lose track of time.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Clayton ended up inviting both women up to his hotel room for drinks..

“I’ve got to get up early. I’ve got some work for Helena in the morning.”

Helena saw this as her way out, but she was already hooked.

“You’re not married.”

“I’ve never been married.”

His room had a stocked bar. He got her a drink as they talked. She felt that she was way past her limit. But she didn’t want to stop at this point.

“So what’s a Texas boy really doing in New York?”

He sat next to her on the couch. He started to kiss her neck. She gave him a gentle push away.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to be gracious.”

The next thing he had her blouse off and was kissing her just below her left breast. She was surrendering quickly to his caresses. The letter had opened her up to this mystery. She was surprised how easily she was giving in.

She stood up and adjusted herself. She picked up her blouse and retreated to the bathroom.

“I’m feeling a little drunk. I just need to splash some water on my face.”

He was feeling very satisfied with himself. He thought that she’d come out ready to party.

She looked at herself in the mirror as she ran waster over her face. This was going too fast. She hardly liked this guy, and already she was almost naked with him. She put her blouse back on and readjusted her clothes.

“I’ve got to go. Stephanie’s doing that work for me. I’ll have to be fresh if I’m going to have chance to look it over.”

“Maybe we could get together again. I’ll be in the city a few more days.”

“Clayton, you’re really a nice guy, but I’m going through some real shit these days. It’s nothing about you. It’s just not a good time.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek as she headed out. She caught a cab and felt relieved as she closed the door behind her. She had held her breath all the way home. What had possessed her. She knew what was going on. She was also sure that Clayton was married. That made the challenge all the more appealing.

She knew where all this was leading. The next morning she’d be composing a letter to London. She cursed her memory. If only she had forgotten the address. But it had burned deep inside her. She repeated it to herself as a way of reawakening the ghosts. It would all lead to the passion that she had dreamed about for years.

“You’re not really going to write him.”

“Stephanie, I have to finish the work that you did. I’m meeting the client this afternoon.”

“But that could be even worse than sleeping with Clayton.”

“I didn’t sleep with him.”

“You think that I believe that. You might convince yourself that you didn’t. But you can’t convince me.”

“I didn’t sleep with him.”

Their discussion was becoming intense.

“Did you write the letter?”

“No, I didn’t. But I tried.”

Her body had been flush with feeling when she tried to write the letter. She had tried draft after draft. She threw each one in the trash.

She had just confessed to Stephanie. Perhaps this was enough to deny the urge.

“You’re still going to write it.”

“I don’t think that I can. I want him for the passion. That raw animal magnetism. But I’m not the same as I was. I can deny my whims.”

“It’s something deeper than a whim.”

“You’re supposed to be telling me not to write the letter.”

“I am. But it’s a kick to have something in your life that makes the blood flow.”

She knew what the letter would mean. She would end up giving in to his invitation. And she would wait in the hotel room as he tried to get away from his wife. She had lived her life as if Bessborough Gardens had been this exception. He wanted it to be her rule.

He made it seem as if he had stored this romantic vision deep inside of himself. But he had a wife and child. This wasn’t the same old Tony. He seemed tired and used. She needed to deny her curiosity.

The night with Clayton still upset her. Her judgement was getting clouded. Maybe there was a deeper reason for her upset. Something had stayed unsettled for her after her departure

from London.

She reconsidered his proposal. It could only wreak havoc for the security that she had established for herself.

Stephanie stopped by after the client meeting.

“How did the designs do?”

“Your work was fantastic. He loved it.”

Helena wanted to go into more detail, but Stephanie changed the subject.

“You still haven’t written the letter?”

“No. I don’t think that I will.”

“That’s will power.”

“He’s using me. Now he feels guilty because his life isn’t going so well.”

“Don’t give in. Although I know that it’s hard.”

Helena came in extra early the next morning. Her will power was still holding. One of her failed drafts was on the desk.

“Why didn’t I throw this away?”

She read it. It brought tears to her eyes. She knew what that meant. She wadded up the paper and tossed it in the trash.

“I’m not going to think about this.

Around five thirty, she felt that her resolve had been sufficient to carry her through the day. She felt relieved that she hadn’t given in. His selfishness seemed so overwhelming to her. She thought about those days wandering the Gardens. It had been like a break down.

She felt herself falling down that cliff again. There he was ready to catch her.

*Dear Tony*

*I never should have written you a reply. But your smugness really pissed me off. You claim that your mother and Bertie prevented you from being with me. That is the lamest excuse in the book. You knew when our appointment was. You could have been there. Instead, you left me to wait.*

*I was a helpless girl then. Now, I am a grown woman. I regret falling for your ruse. I know that I was a fling for few days on the Mediterranean. And that was that.*

*Now you tell me that you hate your life. Although you are deluding yourself once more. Trying to hide behind your dissatisfaction.*

*Come out in the light, Tony Richmond, and see who you really are. You can have your servants and handlers. But no one can protect you from the person that you have really become.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Helena*

She looked at her letter. She realized that she would have to send it out quickly while the venom still flowed in her veins.

While the rage was still hot, she addressed the letter. He was going to get his due.

She didn't mail the letter that evening. It was on the corner of her desk the next day.  
 "You want me to take this?"  
 "No, it's going to England. I have to check something about the address."  
 She still wondered if she had the courage to send it. But she knew that she had no choice.

*Dear Helena*

*Your letter really took me aback. I think that I still imagined the girl of seventeen who I met at the wild party. I guess time makes us more honest than we would like to admit.*

*I admit that I must have assumed things in my first letter. I am glad that you had the guts to set me straight.*

*I do have a child. I have responsibilities. But they are destroying the real me. I know that I could again find myself in your arms.*

*Love,  
 Tony*

He was unrepentant. She hated this in him. But there was nothing that she could do. He was using what little emotions remained in her. And she saw what was happening. He was using her denials to pique her interest. She wouldn't be able to fend him off.

"You're not going back to London."

"I have to see for myself. Did I make a mistake by putting him out of my life?"

"You're making a mistake by going back."

Stephanie thought that she might offer one last out for Helena. But she knew that experience would be her only teacher.

As the plane taxied down the runway, she said goodbye to the self that had sustained her all these years. She was again the romantic youth trying to rekindle her lost love. It was all absurd. Even if she could embrace her old self, she would never be able to trust him again. She was giving in to hurt herself for all these years.

She wanted to get off the plane. The whole plan seemed self-destructive. But she wanted to feel his touch. She wanted his kisses. She wanted to surrender again. The hot sun still burned inside her.